

Bob Dylan: moustache all his own work

Joker Man

Facing old age with a smile.

Bob Dylan
Love And Theft

AT THE TURN of the 1980s, his most accident-prone decade by furlongs, Bob Dylan released Oh Mercy. His fans rejoiced, the world spun off its axis, and then he brought out the pretty threadbare Under The Red Sky. For some, the disappointment positively ached. That turn of events is bound to inform expectations vis-à-vis his 30th studio album given that 1997's Time Out Of Mind was so good, pessimists may be bracing themselves for anticlimax. Thankfully, this is little short of a treat: a rambunctious dance through the more sepia-tinted corners of US musical history, split – broadly speaking – between 12-bar R&B and (no, really) swing ballads. On both counts, its author does rather well.

If Time Out Of Mind tended to find Dylan staring into the abyss, here he seems to have concluded that, when faced with the travails of late middle age, humour is the better option. "Everybody get ready to lift up your glasses and say I'm a-standing on the table, proposin' a toast to decay," goes the rockabilly-esque Summer Days. One verse later comes this: "She said, Ya can't repeat the past/I said, Ya

can't? Whaddya mean ya can't – of course ya can!" The lines, Dylanologists may be intrigued to know, are from The Great Gatsby. On the swing numbers, things get funnier. It's only Dylan's lived-in voice and sheer presence that lets him get away with some of the lines here. Take Poor Boy: "Man came to the door/I said, For whom are you lookin'?" Said, "Your wife/I said, she's busy in the kitchen, cookin'". Really, who needs scansion?

Such tomfoolery apart, there are two strait-faced songs that instantly join the roll-call of Dylan classics. Mississippi could sit comfortably on 1989's esteemed Oh Mercy. The stunning Sugar Baby, meanwhile, is a message to an estranged lover, somewhere between a tired final goodbye and a sardonic put-down – in that sense, it's not entirely misplaced to think of it in the same terms as Idiot Wind from Blood On The Tracks. Consider Love And Theft in the context of its predecessor, and you come to a welcome conclusion. Bob Dylan has followed an excellent album with a very good one. And that hasn't happened since 1976. ★★★★★

John Harris

Standout Tracks

Mississippi
Poor Boy
Sugar Baby

Joe Henry

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Roaring US songwriter still roving. This time with Ornette Coleman along for the ride.

If 1995's exquisite Trampoline couldn't elevate Joe Henry's fortunes then nothing can. Still, with this eighth album, Madonna's sister's husband shows little sign of compromise. Further away than ever from the jayhawks-assisted organic rock for which he acquired a cult following, Scar ropes in trumpeter/saxophonist Ornette Coleman and enfant terrible jazz pianist Brad Mehldau to mess up the thoughtfully twisted lyrics. The soul's spiced Richard Pryor addresses A Terrible Nation and string out life cut may be the non-jazz enthusiast but Henry functions perfectly elsewhere. Mean Flower, Stop Twister for his sister-in-law and Edgar Bergen – the latter's on-the-edge swoops and outbursting drums, fleshing out his finest vocal yet – delivering perfect snapshots of what Henry does best: bone-dry storytelling by a younger, less ruined Tom Waits.

Exceptional ★★★★★

Marek Blake

Like this? Try these...

Bruce Cockburn: Charity Of Night (Mercury)

Matt Hollis: Back To Back (Mercury)

Dave Gray: The Ladder (Mercury)

John Hiatt

The Tiki Bar Is Open

Label: Slash (Capricorn)

That tricky (gulp) 16th album from cult US songwriter perennial.

A pedigree songwriter whose clients have included everybody from Iggy Pop to Conway Twitty, John Hiatt's name means little more now than when he started in the mid-'70s. While The Tiki Bar Is Open won't change anything, long head Hiatt watchers will have no cause for complaint. After last year's drumless Crossing Muddy Waters, he's reunited with his old road outfit, The Goners (including ace guitarist Sonny Landreth), to deliver a rollicking bar-band set that blends characteristically pensive rockers with tender ballads before signing off in fine style with the spacey Farther Stars. Wry, worldly and with a kick like a satanic mule, it's never too late to get acquainted, you know. ★★★★★

Peter Kline



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new albums

kd lang

Live By Request

The country star plays her songs live and, well, by request.

Kd Lang's first live album also serves as her first greatest hits release, recorded, as it was, for a US TV series which invites fans to send in requests. The resultant 18 tracks include the inevitable Constant Craving, Three Cigarettes and, from last year's excellent Inevitable Summer LP, Summer Ping. If the sheer quality of the songs is a given, their recorded performance is a disappointment. The drums are often too loud, odd instruments push themselves to the fore at awkward moments, and, perhaps spurred on by the enthusiastic applause, Lang veers towards exuberant over-singing. Once or twice, though, as on the tender Trail Of Broken Hearts and the slumping Miss Chastaine, material and performance get it together just right. ★★★

David Roberts

Bill Laswell

Divine Light

Reunited producer Bill Laswell

The avant rocker's reunited, reworked vision of early '70s Carlos Santana.

Reunited producer Bill Laswell earned his über-mus stripes long ago, but it was his 1998 Miles Davis project, *Panthalassa*, that showed what he could do when invited to remix and reorder historic recordings. Music from Carlos Santana's 1973 *Love Devotion Surrender* project with guitarist John McLaughlin and his 1974 *Illusions* with Alice Coltrane (John's missus) gets the Laswell treatment this time. All three musicians were devotees of guru Shri Chinmoy, and spiritual themes abound (in a post-19th-century Western-harp-Eastern-percussion way). But Laswell's sense of structure is extraordinary, and he adds layers of excitement and intrigue that not even the musicians involved could have imagined. ★★★★★

Simon Chinnock

Love As Laughter

See To Shining Sea

Skewed rock classicism from Beck collaborator and pal.

It's equally symptomatic of Love As Laughter's position in the US alt-rock firmament that frontman Sam Jayne works as a waiter up at a chichi Seattle burrito restaurant favoured by the city's rock gladiators. But while Jayne has spent the last six years up to his elbows in

suds, his band has also been knocking out some invigoratingly amplified music. Encompassing three decades of youth rock cool, *See To Shining Sea* circles biker rock and black-hearted Velvet Underground grooves. Single Temptation Island makes like AC/DC playing on-fall guitars, while the Squire even resurrects raga-rock. Perhaps the time has come to give up the day job. ★★★★★

For Long

Nick Lowe

The Convincer

Boomer still telling it like it is, 12th time around.

Nick Lowe has been going forever, long enough to make the art of making records seem as natural as drinking breath. Containing 10 originals plus Johnny Rivers' Poor Side Of Town and Arthur Prysock's Only A Fool Breaks His

Own Heart, *The Convincer* slots in unobtrusively behind 1998's *Dip My Mind*. The settings are understated, the vocals conversational, while the songs, as filtered through the rueful eyes of this Midsomething Englishman, gain lovingly back to the glory days of Stax, Bill Building pop and Johnny Cash ruling the country roost. As amiably scored as ever, it's a *Music*, *Homecracker* and *Lately I've Let Things Slide* all in

that unique Lowe spot. ★★★

Peter Kone

Cheb Mami

Debut

He's Sting's Algerian mate, you know.

Even fervent internationalists might balk at this talent's emigration from the self-styled Prince Of Ra. With production duties split

between the Rodgers and Mon... after a piece list that... long, Diddy Monkey, Chic... the English Symphony... and London Community... Delia sounds... like a last, desperate... to reach an audience... the Parisian suburbs. Le... Chic anyone? Thought... there, it's all so damned... and shiny and eager to

please. Hardly surprising that the best track, *Tissaw*, should involve the most traditional. ★★

Peter Kone

Maxwell

Debut

Third studio album from New York's classic soulster.

If Urban Hang Suite was about the past and *Embrya* the future, now is

Maxwell's turn to firmly embrace the present. A much more focused and funky set than *Embrya*, it features mostly slow songs (including *Rise* by A. Woman's *Workabout* the emotions and *Understand* of love, but with a more formal element and an *Urban* party ending. The arrangements are not overly shiny and busy, leaving Maxwell's style and talent to shine and belt. *Workabout* Maxwell's impetuous vulnerability. The more urgent numbers will early Prince in their syncretism, funk guitars and suggestive lyrics, while the hedonistic *Urban* dance groove of *Moore* might set the Maxwell cranking the left hand charts. ★★★

Jon Cram

Macy Gray

The Id

Her second

WHEN THE *Miseducation* Of Lauryn Hill sold millions, it was with a sense of inevitability. As a beautiful member of the most popular hip hop act of the mid '90s, Hill was assured success. Not so Macy Gray. An unknown with a voice that suggested she had sucked helium from a party balloon, and an unconventional image infamously mocked by Ali G at the Brits, Gray defied music industry logic to sell seven million copies of her resolutely old-school 1999 debut *On How Life Is*. Unlike Hill, Gray did not object when white audiences bought her album in the kind of numbers currently enjoyed by her everyman namesake David.

For her second album, Macy Gray has called in some big names, including producer Rick Rubin, Red Hot Chili Peppers guitarist John Frusciante, organist Billy Preston (a veteran of both Beatles and Rolling Stones sessions), nu-soul divas Erykah Badu and Angie Stone, and Wimbledon-born ex-con rapper Slick Rick. The result is an album rich in texture and guaranteed to top shopping lists come Christmas.

As any good shrink will attest, this album's title refers to Freud's theory of the pleasure-seeking subconscious, but Gray's Bridget Jones constituency have nothing to fear. *The Id* is business as usual. The first single *Sweet Baby* co-stars Badu and moves as slinky as Gray's breakthrough hit *I Try*. Likewise, *Boo* and *Harry* echo the quietly horny soul of her debut.

It is only when she tries something a little different that Macy comes unstuck. *Sexual Revolution*, a Prince-inspired disco number, is the least sexy song about sex since WASP's *Animal* (Fuck Like A Beast). Worse, *Oblivion* is a cod-Broadway showpiece that makes Meat Loaf sound understated. On these two tracks Gray is trying too hard, and needlessly so. There is enough subtle invention in the freaky funk of *Related To A Psychopath* and the gospel/hip hop crossover of *Hey Young World II* (reminiscent of Jay-Z's *Hard Knock Life*) to keep her music fresh. And there are still just enough seductive songs to give Lauryn Hill a few sleepless nights. ★★★

Paul Elliott

Standout Tracks

Sweet Baby
Related To A Psychopath
Harry

Mazarin

A Tall Tale Storyline

Buddhist-influenced prettiness from Philly's leading psychedelics.

Peter Turk lookalike and Philadelphia resident Quaker Soulful - yes, his real name - follows the gorgeous 1999 debut *Watch It Happen* with a more collaborative effort bringing on board producer Brian McPhee, Rogers Rd. John's Matt Worth and Leno drummer Sean Byrne. Opening track *Go Home* reflects Soulful's trip to Thailand earlier this year with the purity of Buddhist beliefs covered by layers of harmony and acoustic guitar. There's similar startling beauty in songs such as *Sacred Will Make You Happy*, an acid-tripped ballad reminiscent of the bottomless single *Wheels*, ensuring the memorable that "you don't have to pretend that suicide will make you happy". Just lovely. ★★★★★

Anne Muller

David Mead

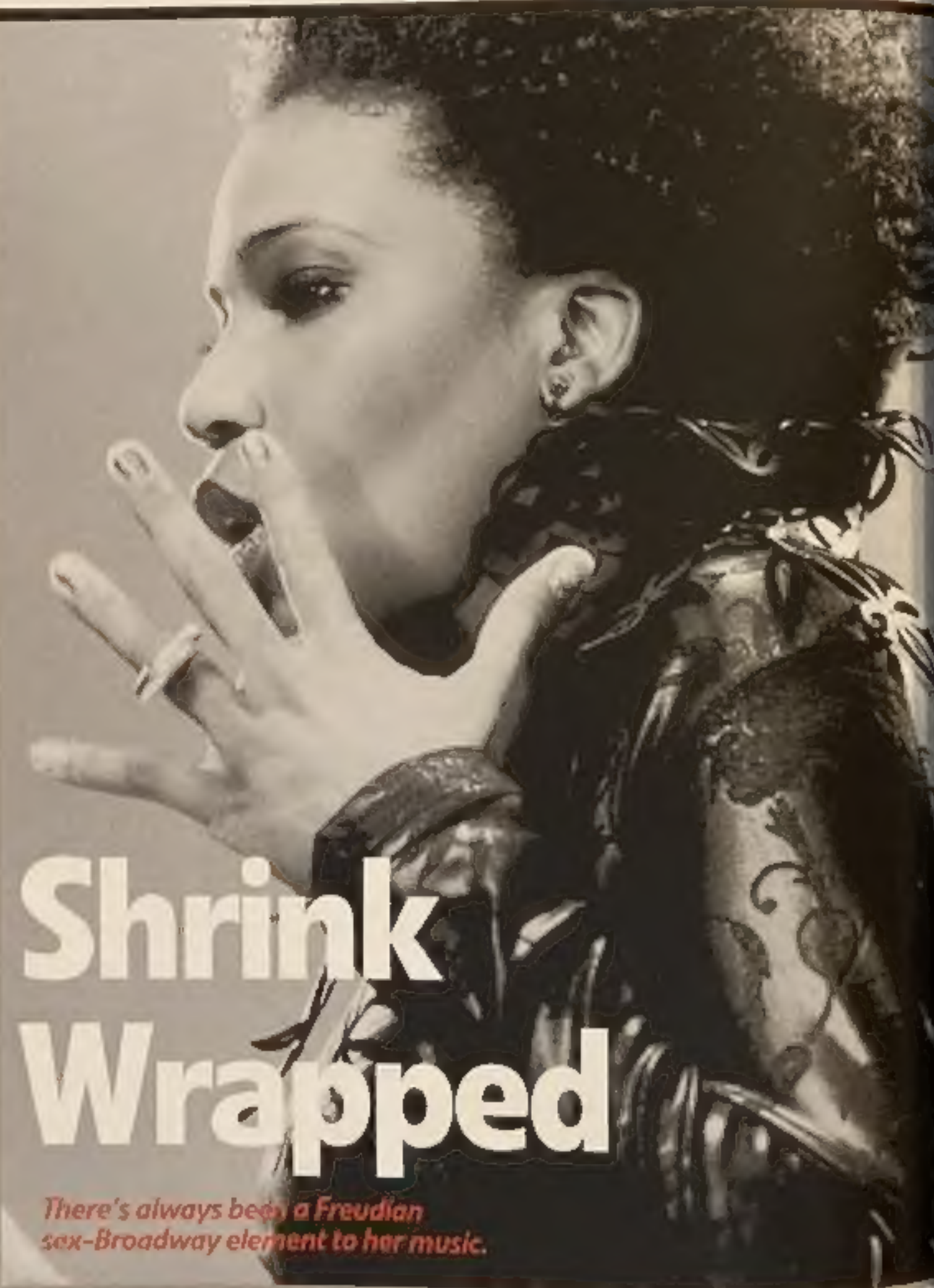
Mine And Yours

His third

New York tunesmith steps up from carrying own guitar on last year's solo tour.

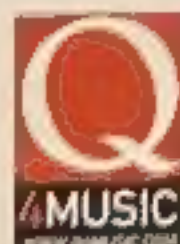
Promoting his first album last year, David Mead took the young Paul Simon route, travelling the UK by train like a proper folk troubadour. But this image doesn't represent the gifts he displays on this follow-up, *Mine And Yours*. Although his sweet, high-voice, which slips smoothly in and out of falsetto, hints at Simon's *Even Them* Yorks, the essence of Mead is flowing, romantic pop tunes. Given a proper band, he pours out love-lamented and tenderizing love-laments and tenderizing love-laments, fitting between "I love you with the radio on" (*For Comfort*) and "Could you be my girl tonight?" (*For What I Want To Do*). However, since this is not yet nothing new or particularly commercial, his best hope of getting rich might involve flogging the songs to some ambitious Brit boy band. ★★★

Phil Sutcliffe



Shrink Wrapped

There's always been a Freudian sex-Broadway element to her music.



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